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BUILDING A WORLD WHERE GENDER EQUITY REIGNS

GIRL TALK AFRIQUE JOURNAL

Produced by the
ChooseYourself team



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Dear Community,

I am very honored and proud to present to you:
GirlTalk Afrique Journal report:

A Pan-African voice of Young feminists.

In this journal report, you will hear from young women at the forefront of dismantling patriarchal oppression in their communities.

Our shared vision at ChooseYourself has always been to power young women's voices in the hope that once they tap into their collective power then they can champion change in their communities.

This Journal report is one of the ways we channeled young women's power into a collective voice. It's proof that indeed young women and girls are capable of naming the complexities of their lives experiences at the hands of patriarchy but more importantly they are well suited to organize for their rights. The articles in this journal are centered around the three main themes of Girl Talk Afrique as a movement that works to end rape culture, achieve reproductive justice and raise a feminist consciousness. Consider this journal as our contributions in theorizing the lives of African women/ girls and non binary communities at large.

Happy reading,

Judicaelle Irakoze

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

“This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity. . . . If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.

—COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE, 1977”

My journey into feminism has always been one I’ve allowed to expand and evolve all the time.

I’ve understood the importance of this because my introduction to feminism was through white feminist blogs and articles. Through womanism, a Black, African-American feminist ideology, I learned more about celebrating and uplifting black women’s experiences. I tried womanism for a while, but I came back more firmly in the broader and the oretical frameworks of black feminisms. From women’s suffrage to all the uprising protests and resistances against oppression, I learned that black women have always been unwilling to compromise on the assertion that “a feminism” that does not incorporate different experiences and identities of womanhood cannot achieve complete liberation. With this revelation, I found a home space to stay.

Still, in my quest to deepen my feminist consciousness, I was lucky enough to be well aligned with the timings of ‘Girl Talk’ introduced in Rwanda. I remember the first Girl Talk that happened back in 2018, which felt like a well-curated response to my longing to be in communion with activists, that was now welcoming more friends and sisters to love, connect with and reimagine together a safer world for all of us. When I finally joined Choose Yourself organization, specifically as a Girl Talk Ambassador,

I then had the opportunity to reflect and refine what being an African feminist meant to me. Being part of Girl Talk Afrique enriched my journey and entry into feminism. It invited me to slowly divorce from western perspectives of feminism by paying attention to colonization and neoliberal systems and focusing on the experiences of African women on the continent.

Girl Talk as a program has always been important to me. It has become the place I return to so many times, a home space I’ve shredded off old skins of internalized stereotypes.



Girl Talk has raised my baby feminist self to become in charge of so many responsibilities. I’m not one to find praise in titles, but being a Girl Talk Ambassador to a Coordinator in Rwanda, and now the Director of Girl Talk Afrique Anglophone, has built me. It undeniably came with many battles, both personal and professional. Managing a team that works to develop transformation analysis and action tools through dialogues and community building has changed me several times.

But, this has remained my favorite part of the work we do; growth has meant to be open to change, expand, and never contract my desire for a utopian feminist world. My journey into feminism has taught me the importance of liberatory identity politics because movement building has demanded first to get to know who I am and that, first and foremost, I am doing this work for myself. Identity politics is also crucial in understanding that African women are not a monolith and that transformative change is also heavily dependent on the community; social movements are made up of diverse identities to show up in their most authentic selves.

The virtual and in-person gatherings have felt like a response to finding healthy sisterhoods, an opportunity to unlearn and relearn. And also a response to the violence we face in the world. It’s incredibly moving to be in a space intentionally curated to listen to each other and take up action to foster change in our communities. And that’s what’s beautiful about Girl Talk Afrique. Writing this foreword has been a reflecting time for me.

In this journal report, we use a feminist lens to document the facts, tell stories, the status and lived experiences of young African women, and the reality of different forms of organizing practiced by African feminists on the continent. In this attempt, we aim to keep records and act as a foundation for the next generation of feminists to begin organizing. This journal report is a collaboration of work between the team at Girl Talk and different grassroots organizations that can be referred to as a pan-African centerpiece to be referenced when it comes to movement building and the intersectional realities of women's struggles and experiences. This centerpiece also shines a light on the work we do at Girl Talk and the impact we have had and continue to envision for each African country we operate in. We hope you find it enlightening and enjoyable to read.



Author : Kobusingye Bonitah

GT ANGLOPHONE DIRECTOR

The Pro-Choice movement in Nigeria

Nigeria, just like so many other African states is led by patriarchal conservatism that regularly and legally denies full autonomy to women, queer and trans folk, and still, the rate of sexual violence prevails along with sexual and reproductive healthcare remaining extremely limited. A 2013 study showed that only 16% of Nigerian women of reproductive age (15-49) have access to, and use, contraception. This means that more than four out of five Nigerian women are unable to prevent unwanted pregnancies. And when they do get pregnant, many are forced to choose between birthing children they don't want or risking unsafe, illegal termination since abortion is only legal in Nigeria if a doctor deems the woman's life is in danger. We talked to Pro-Choice Nigeria to get more insight into their work and to learn from what's being done to make sexual and reproductive health services more accessible and providing comprehensive sex education. Pro-Choice is a pro-abortion, non-profit organization in Nigeria with aims to de-stigmatize and legalize abortion in Nigeria. It is run by a group of young intersectional feminists.

1. Could you share with us more about the strategies and approaches to organizing you've been involved in?

We try as much as possible to reach out to people with the same goals as us, collaborating on various projects has turned out to be key to organizing.

2. What are some of the main objectives and women's struggles you mainly focus on at Pro-Choice?

We focus heavily on access to reproductive services. Nigeria is the poverty capital of the world and as a result of that, healthcare is not accessible to a huge number of the population so while taking action to legalize abortion, we also discuss making these services available to low-income earners. Another objective at prochoice is destigmatizing sex and everything related to it i.e abortion, sexually transmitted infections etcetera.

3. While we are still talking about women's struggles, some African nations are taking creative steps toward achieving a Comprehensive Sex and Sexuality education that could support not only healthy sexuality but better gender relations and a reduction in sexual violence. What's the current status of implementing this in Nigeria?

Nigeria has been extremely slow in passing and implementing laws concerning sexual health. A number of nonprofits have taken to implementing healthy sexual education in Nigerian schools with little to no help from the government. Organizations such as the hands-off initiative and the consent workshop are doing this work.

4. What are some of the cultural, social attitudes, and religious aspects that could be limiting the implementation of comprehensive sex and sexuality education?

When brainstorming ways to implement sexual education, a recurring theme is worrying about the outrage that will be expressed by the religious community. A huge number of the Nigerian population believes discussing sex-related topics with children and young adults will "corrupt" their minds. Sex is a taboo topic that should be tucked away and never be discussed in public.

5. Could you share any definitive data and statistics on the number of rape cases and in relation to teenage pregnancies and abortion?

In this article by Somotochuku, she discusses teen pregnancy in Nigeria. Here is an excerpt: To illustrate how serious the situation of early pregnancy is in Nigeria, I took a look at the recently published "Demographic and Health Survey 2013." In Nigeria, an estimated 23 percent of women aged 15-19 years have begun childbearing, of which 17 percent have had their first child and 5 percent are pregnant with their first child. Also, 32 percent of teenagers in rural areas have begun childbearing, as opposed to 10 percent in the urban areas of Nigeria." [Here is a link to her article.](#)

The Guttmacher Institute has also published a number of abortion-related data in Nigeria, here is an excerpt from one of their articles. "An estimated 1.25 million induced abortions occurred in Nigeria in 2012, equivalent to a rate of 33 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15-49. The estimated unintended pregnancy rate was 59 per 1,000 women aged 15-49. Fifty-six percent of unintended pregnancies were resolved by abortion.

About 212,000 women were treated for complications of unsafe abortion, representing a treatment rate of 5.6 per 1,000 women of reproductive age, and an additional 285,000 experienced serious health consequences but did not receive the treatment they needed."

[Here is a link:](#)

6. What are some of the accessible sexual and reproductive health services and contraception methods available in Nigeria? And what's been the reaction and response to these methods?

There are a number of nonprofits such as Marie Stopes, Safe2choose, The Mirabel center amongst others that provide sexual and reproductive health services in Nigeria. Condoms, birth control pills, and IUDs are not readily available to every Nigerian.

The demonization of sex and contraceptives play a huge role in how accessible they are, it is much easier to access contraceptives in certain parts of Nigeria than in others. There is a huge lack of access to information about these nonprofits and how to access what they do which is why we created a document that contains a number of organizations and centers which offer health services. [Resource document](#)

7. Has there been any involvement and mobilization by Nigerian feminist communities and organizations to improve sex ed and access to contraceptives, if there have been, could you share their work and what their contribution was?

A relatively new nonprofit called the operation to legalize abortion put together a conference recently which was set up to discuss the restrictive laws governing abortion in Nigeria. They are planning on putting together recurring conferences such as these to further educate and strategize ways to legalize abortion in Nigeria.

8. Could you provide us with a full description of how you'd define 'a comprehensive sex and sexuality education in the contexts of what's needed in Nigeria'?

Sex and sexuality education covers consent, sexually transmitted diseases and infections, the act of sex in itself, debunking a number of sex and abortion-related myths, abortion and various ways in which abortions can be carried out, lastly, promotes pleasure that is not centered around the male gaze.

9. What are some of the most important goals Pro-Choice Nigeria aims to achieve in regards to feminist projects?

We aim to create safe spaces for people to talk about sex and abortion, to bring to light how inaccessible sexual and reproductive health services are to low-income earners, and finally to legalize abortion in Nigeria.



My dress, My Choice: A Girl talk Kenya Conversation.

Women's bodies have been a battleground for unsolicited male opinions and gratuitous violence from time immemorial. Although the female body is very political, we've seen victims of sexual violence being asked what they were wearing to "invite" acts of violence perpetrated against them over the years. We have seen women being stripped in public for allegedly wearing indecent clothing. We have witnessed harassment, insults, and humiliation being directed at women for their choice of dressing. However, haven't we also heard of doddering and over-the-hill grandmothers being raped? Two months old babies defiled and left to the mercy of their tiny, fragile hearts exposed to the savage hands of atrocious men? It serves to show that even if we put on titanium-plated armor to sheath ourselves, our bodies will still be violated.

A devastating statistic by the World Health Organization states that 1 in 3 women globally have experienced sexual harassment, and the numbers continue to rise during this COVID-19 period. The Sexual Violence Research Initiative defines sexual violence as any sexual act or attempt to obtain a sexual act or unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. The term is often used as an umbrella statement that includes multiple forms of harm, including rape, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, and child sexual abuse. Sexual violence envelopes various forms of harm that many individuals face, particularly women, queer folk, and sex workers who are often prone to sexual violence due to their occupation. Sexual violence also encompasses visual, physical, and verbal violence.

In November 2014, repulsed Kenyan women started an online campaign, #MyDressMyChoice.

They took to the streets of Nairobi after a woman was stripped and brutally assaulted outside a Nairobi bus stop for wearing a miniskirt. The attackers (men) accused the victim of "tempting" them because she was wearing "indecent" clothing.

Unfortunately, that's not the only incident where women were stripped in public for allegedly wearing indecent clothing. The claims to justify these acts are always based on religious and cultural ideologies. Still, as Nanjala Nyabola argues, the stripping attacks on women in Kenya over claims of "indecent" are not religious or moral at heart but political.

If you speak to many women in Kenya, particularly Nairobi, they will tell you that there are areas in the capital where they cannot go when dressed in specific ways. Areas where unruly men are self-proclaimed "fashion". You have to "censor" your attire lest the frivolous men on the streets pounce on you with their vindictive wrath.

During Girl Talk Kenya in March 2021, one concern raised while having a conversation on sexual violence with sex workers was that the women sex workers sometimes get arrested for what they are wearing. The police go-ahead to charge them for wearing "provocative" and "indecent" clothes while it is common knowledge that there is no law in Kenya that limits, controls, or criminalizes any form of dressing. This proves that women's bodies are subject to control by men, society, and the state.

Clothing, much more than materials to protect us from the elements, is a way for people to express who they are. Over the years, clothes have evolved for different uses and different expressions, allowing for the creation of all types of cuts, designs, and arrangements. In the 20th Century, clothes were made which can be described as sexy due to their cuts and design. However, this does not mean that clothes are a way to consent to sexual activities..



Consent is an informed and communicated agreement; thus, clothes cannot be a form of consent. Clothing, although an expression of one's self, character, or even as a way to communicate a message, whether metaphorical or literal, cannot speak actual words for

people, particularly concerning sexual activity. Consent must be informed; therefore, people must think and analyze the activity they engage in and assess their willingness to participate. And that's something clothing cannot do. **Consent cannot be implied; thus, clothes cannot communicate consent to sexual activities. It furthers the conversation that consent is not automatic; neither is it passive. People can choose to look sexy or conservative; however, that does not mean they have requested or accepted to be in any form of sexual contact or sexual activity, nor are individuals allowed to engage in verbal sexual violence such as catcalling**

Clothing only expresses individuals based on how they see themselves and want to be seen. Although, in many cases for women where our clothing is often over-sexualized, it still is in no way a form of consent, as that can only be given by a person who is informed and enthusiastic about giving such permission.

Society does not create space for women to exercise their agency; by pushing the blame in sexual violence cases unto women due to how they dress, society continues to suppress women's agency and help men avoid accountability for their malicious acts. Society tries to assert that the cause of sexual violence is women who dress "indecently" or "provocatively". It deflects from the real issue: men should stop violating women's bodies.

For how long will we say that how we dress is not consent to sexual activity? For how long will we say that what we wear is not an invitation to our bodies? How someone dresses is not an infringement of anyone's right but controlling it is. The dressing is an expression of self and so exercising this is justified by the constitution of Kenya under the Bill of Rights.

Bodily autonomy is at the core of feminist principles, and so today and forever we say that this body is our own, and it must be treated as such with dignity and respect

Authored by the Girl Talk Kenya team.

Candice Njoroge

Nyambura Joyce

Sifa Anam

Nourishing Anger: An interview with Scheaffer Okore

In one of Audre Lorde's essays titled, "The uses of anger: women are responding to racism," she says: "My fear of anger taught me nothing. Your fear of that anger will teach you nothing.

Women responding to racism means women responding to anger; Anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and co-optation."

We borrow from Audre Lorde's powerful words as we reflect on what it means to be an angry black feminist in Kenya, especially during the rapid eruption of social injustices intensified by the COVID-19 Pandemic. From protests like #TotalShutDownKE, #EndPoliceBrutality, and others in the past to feminists on Twitter being labeled as angry, we spoke to Scheaffer Okore about how anger is of appropriate importance to a movement aiming to achieve social transformation. Scheaffer Okore is a feminist, policy, and governance polymath whose work is centrally focused on strategy and policy in global development. She is currently working as the Director of Policy and Advocacy at Women Political Leaders Organisation (Iceland), a senior policy advisor at Reid Strategies (Seattle), and a Senior Strategy Advisor at SCOPE Impact (Helsinki).

1. For this interview, we are trying to explore righteous anger. Could you describe to us what that means for you as a feminist?

Anger is one of the many emotions that we, as women, and all folk who experience marginalization and oppression, aren't allowed to express. One example is how girls are raised into "minding their tone" from an early age, while boys getting loud, aggressive, and pushy when upset are "just being boys."

Angry women are dismissed, often even harmed because everyone is okay with you being sad and frustrated and mad, but not at you talking about it or trying to do something about what made you angry. We all know the infamous stereotype about "angry black women," used in derogatory ways that are meant to ridicule the woman for being mad while also disparaging and demeaning the issue that made her angry in the first place.

So I believe that one has to claim the right to be angry as a feminist. It is costly, though: it comes with being known as the angry one and being dismissed because of that. They will call us bitter and say we should be grateful for the crumbs of consideration we sometimes get, but they are free to be angry. There are many gaslighting and lies in making oppressed people

imagine that all they had to do was "ask nicely" to stop their oppressors. Therefore Feminists shouldn't be afraid to show they are angry. There is so much to be mad about: there are places where anger can be fuel for change. The work is discovering where and how.

2. Do you remember when you first got truly angry at the world? Was it an instantaneous moment of rage, or was it gradual for you, and how has this anger been of use to you?

My anger is the helplessness, invisibility, neglect, insidious violations, and systemic injustices that we as women and other marginalized communities go through every day. There have been so many moments in the entirety of my life when the world treated me and countless others as lesser being who wasn't worthy of protection or care. I first got furious when I realized how much women/girls aren't believed in the face of harm when I realized that being considered is a privilege that women don't have.

My anger then and even now are critical reminders about right and wrong. Anger is a way of knowing that a wrong has been done that needs correcting. So even though I may not always have all the words to describe how it feels, where it lives in my body, and how it manifests, it helps me to remind myself that being angry is the first right step—the step that acknowledges the injustice—during many, many other problems.

3. Do you think feminist anger is warranted and in what ways?

I think feminist anger is one of the many ways of reclaiming full humanity by demonstrating how unacceptably violent this world has been, is, and continues to be in enforcing gender inequalities despite how much they hurt everyone, men included.

- **Do you think it makes any kind of difference or catalyzes any type of change? If so, how are these changes instigated and what are they?**

Absolutely yes, countless tangible outcomes have been derived from the collective anger of feminists. For example, it was Kenyan feminists who stood angrily against the sub-par menstrual pads that menstruators had been enduring, not just in Kenya but in many other global South countries. It is again feminists who organize against femicide and risk their own lives so that no more women can be killed at the hands of their intimate partners. Feminists everywhere organize against the brutal sexual violence that so many face all over Africa and even the world.

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4. Do you feel that ALL women should be and stay angry? Why so?

I believe that every woman has a furious phase of their life, especially when they realize how much the world has taken from them and other women just because they are women. They carry and express it differently, in different generations, different socioeconomic classes, different levels of access, different cultures. It will last for as long as patriarchy exists. Anger remains a constant way with which women experience the world, and because human bodies aren't meant to live in constant danger, the offense must change to something else.

Different people with different possibilities and limits do other things with this anger. Some women weaponize it against their daughters, daughters-in-law, younger, and poorer women. Some people, even women, get into power and use it to advance themselves at the expense of others because it is always easier to change things for an individual than for a demographic. Other people, though, and we are so grateful for this, take it and use it as fuel for change: as officials in their work, in their home lives, in their parenting, in their art and creative processes, in activist campaigns, in media engagement, in private conversations in the market, at the salon, whispered in a clothing store, said as prayers to their gods and ancestors that things will be different for others, and that they will be better. Anger is the first key to that.

5. What are some feminist principles you hold and feel should be included as we manage our anger individually and collectively within this movement?

I think maybe two things: the first being that we have to hold space for each other in our anger. Our fellows in work and the movement are our siblings in the struggle, and so however frustrated we are, we cannot turn the force onto them as though they are the enemy. So we have to hold our anger together and use it to synergize with and fuel each other even as we comfort each other, give each other respite, care for each other, and give each other places to smile, laugh, breathe deep cries.

The second thing is that this work takes so much from us, and we burn out: we have to learn when to tap out and not see our need for rest as a failure. Staying to push forward when burned out is another thing that makes us angry: we get mad at ourselves for needing rest, furious at our siblings in the struggle for not seeing how exhausted and weak we are, afraid that if we leave the battle, we might not want to come back. So we have to take a beat and rest. The struggle will be there when we have it in us to return: patriarchy will not die tomorrow. We will leave the generations after us fighting it too. So refusing to be angry at ourselves because we are not invincible and taking time out, as others continue, and coming back to fight to give them time out, is the only way we will survive this together.

6. Is it true that we first turn the anger inward as a source of conditioning, rather than to the true sources of this rage? How can we teach women and girls to externalize it more instead?

It starts with caring about how the young are being raised. If we are parents, guardians, aunts, god folks, older siblings, and others, we have to hold and protect the space for young girls and women to express themselves in full. We have to ask them how they feel about certain things.

We have to tell them stories expose them to media that shows them it is okay to be angry. And we also have to be there to protect them from the resistance they will face when they are angry, and people know about it. Finally, we have to allow them to express, through sport, art, speaking, their areas of choice—all of it.

We also have to believe them when they say they have been harmed so that they do not have to swallow their truths and die inside when they are left alone with their pain. We have to stand with them, fight for them, and protect them, so that they are not alone, even if we had to be.

7. How can we as feminists be in strong solidarity knowing our anger is so demonized in the patriarchal world, and some if not most of that energy is transferred into the feminist space?

The thing that harms our solidarity is not the anger, and it is not that the anger is demonized: I think it is perhaps that we are afraid that we will not show each other loyalty or care, and that we are worried that the work is in vain, that we are not seen clearly for who we are. **Class differences, for instance, within the movement itself, are a massive issue that has less to do with anger at an external enemy of a system and more to do with how we treat one another and knowledge that we do not all come into the struggle the same. Classed women and folk can be very violent towards those not ordered, but expect feminist solidarity unconditionally?** It's, of course, going to affect solidarity. So movements have to do better. We should deal with that in the movement first: what happens when we fear betrayal is coming, when we feel alone, when we feel tired when we feel hopeless when we make each other feel unseen and unheard. How we accommodate for and account for that will help us more with solidarity in work, organizing, movement, and community building.

8. As feminists we exist not only for resistance but joy as well, how do you practice self-care, and what brings you joy within your feminist communities?

Time alone and time away from direct movement work are the first things. We have to learn not to feel guilty for needing it and accept that having a structure for going and coming is healthy. The places I go to listen and learn from others are also fantastic. We do not have to lead everywhere, and at all times, we must balance it by being in places where we trust others to lead, carry and care for us. Being in a community in that way feeds me deeply. I also enjoy good food, good gin, long drives with air on my face, a good drama on TV, time with my family and loved ones, time to hope and dream.

9. Anything more you'd like to add that you feel MUST be heard? Talk to young girls and young feminists who are feeling this anger for the first time.

Yes, they must know that they are so welcome by many open arms, that their anger joins an ocean of rage by so many others for so long, and that they are not alone! There is so much to learn and hear and to find community around. I have enjoyed Tiktok as a space to see and learn from all these new ways of understanding and unpacking politics, which can be helpful for beginners.

The more profound readings and discussions, citations, attributions, looking especially at African feminist women of all generations, will come in time as they grow and become deeper rooted and grounded, but if it is a place to start: Twitter, TikTok, Instagram and all of that is helpful. I also use TikTok to switch off, to watch kittens playing, people arranging flowers, comedians, and animated sausages dancing because balance is essential! Balance is key.

The other thing is that real community exists for you as well: find friends online and offline you can talk about these things with, who you can learn together and be aligned with on these matters so that not everyone in your life is someone you have to hide or alter your feminism around. Feminist friends will make you feel sane. You will learn and be angry together and teach one another so well as you all learn and grow.



Scheaffer Okore

Tackling the root causes of Gender-Based violence: A focus on women and the LGBTQ+ community in Rwanda

Gender-based violence refers to any type of harm perpetrated against a person or group of people because of their factual or perceived sex, gender, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity. (PANDEA et al.)

Regardless of the progress in integrating women in economic and political spaces and claims of safety for LGBTQ+ folks in Rwanda, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is still a threat. Between July 2020 and March 2021, the Rwandan National Public prosecution authority received 3662 child abuse cases committed mainly by men (91.4%) and 2096 domestic abuse cases, again committed primarily to men (94.6%) (Bishumba, 2021) and girls, women or female-presenting persons are the primary victims of the abuse (UNFPA Rwanda, 2020). There are no official records of homophobic or transphobic violence, but reports of queer and trans folks around hint at the state of things regarding SGBV in the country. The leading cause of patriarchy manifests in different patterns of behavior and a culture that is a product of oppressive traditional and religious beliefs.

Rape culture

Rape culture includes any form of social conditioning that tolerates, excuses, or normalizes/trivializes all forms of sexual violence and is enabled by rape apologists who, by their actions or utterances, defend acts of rape and sexual violence. (Agbeko, 2018)

Rape culture presents itself through many cultural practices and behavioral patterns; this essay focuses on victim shaming, victim-blaming, sexual objectification, and how they manifest in Rwanda.

Victim shaming and blaming is an integral part of rape culture in Rwanda. Victims are often discouraged from speaking about their abuse as admitting they were raped would stain them. The culture of silence, paired with slut-shaming tactics, works to invalidate victims while helping rapists evade accountability and justice. One of the stories that come to mind was the public reaction to a miss Rwanda 2020 contestant, Aisha Uwase, when she spoke out about her painful rape experience. Uwase was insulted, pushed to silence herself, and slut-shamed.

Multiple scenarios lead to a victim being silenced; in some cases, victims are silenced to protect the perpetrator if they are related to the victim, avoid retaliation when the perpetrator is influential or in a position of authority, and if the perpetrator is the primary source of financial support for young mothers (Bishumba, 2020).

Members of the LGBTQ+ community face more severe forms of violence; their identities are invalidated, and they face hypersexualization and demonization. Sexual and gender-based violence against queer persons is encouraged by the culture, religion, and the state, so we must look into the public reaction to rape as it plays into the sustenance of rape culture, even inclusive of those identifying under the LGBTQ+IA umbrella. This shaming and blaming practice is apologism, and it plays into absolving abusers of accountability.

Sexual objectification is another tool of rape culture. There are several stories by Rwandan women centered on sexualization; women are seen as objects for sexual gratification, evidenced by catcalling, slut-shaming, and policing women's clothes, choices, and behavior. As stated earlier, the sexualization of queer and trans folks is more pronounced as their existence is solely considered "sexual." Anti-LGBTQ discourse shows that the general public associates "perversion," "sexualization of young people," and other like terms with queer people, hinting at the hypersexualization of LGBTQ+ people. The dehumanization of women and LGBTQ+ folks by positioning them as inherent sexual objects enables the perpetuation of rape culture by stripping them of humanity, resulting in the continuous disregard for bodily autonomy.

Domestic violence

40% of married women in Rwanda will experience some form of emotional, physical, and sexual violence by an intimate partner during their lifetime (NISR, 2016). A famous Rwandan saying, "Niko Zubakwa," which roughly translates to "That's how they're built," is often given in response by elderly women when confronted with knowledge on the dysfunctional and toxic aspects of marriage. The concept hints at how marriage is presented as a necessity for survival and how the institution is unsafe for women. This thinking results from the patriarchal nature of Rwandan culture that enables multiple forms of abuse in households. The apologism and excuses of harm and abuse in marital households through the "Niko Zubakwa" type of mentalities allow for the normalization of toxic homes. However, it provides no grounds to interrogate the established idea of how a household should function to enable Rwandan households to be presented with healthier models not rooted in patriarchal domination paradigms but instead favor mutual wellbeing.

The unquestioned toxic functioning of these households also affects children who grow up in said households because they are likely to be second-hand receivers of the abuse or harm, developing mental wounds and trauma. Growing up with the idea that this is how a household looks, perpetuates this toxic model, resulting in a vicious cycle of violence that transcends generations.

Homophobia and Transphobia

Although no laws criminalize queer and transgender people in Rwanda, the constitution still denies same-sex marriages. In addition, several attempts to criminalize and shame LGBTQ+ are still present whilst the existence of homophobia and transphobia. Alienation, harassment, torture, and assault are realities of visibly queer and trans folks. -You can read more about the realities of LGBTQ+ folks in this report on the realities of visibly queer and trans people by HOCA — an organization that works with queer and trans individuals and communities in Rwanda — sheds more light on the situation.

This article by the New Times Rwanda provides insight into how Rwandans view members of the LGBTQ+ community. There is a common belief that queer people are “not part of the culture, leading to immoral sexual behavior and believed to be more of conditioning than an identity.” The article attempts to erase trans and queer folks by claiming that they do not exist in the country. The constant references to culture and morality point towards the demonization of queer folks, targeted due to the conservative society influenced by traditional norms and Christian beliefs infused in the culture. The conservative nature of Rwandan society prevents the safe existence of queer and trans people in Rwanda.

Liberation is essential, and we cannot achieve it without the freedom of women, and in all the identities they come in and hence, the freedom of trans and queer people too. The numbers and present realities speak for themselves. Women are not safe and even less when they are queer and Trans. Each of us must identify our particular strengths and put them at the service of our mutual survival through collective resistance and denouncing patriarchal tools and structures because we are not free until all of us are free.

Conversations where we name experiences resulting from patriarchal violence, address accepted patriarchal norms, reflect on what resistance to patriarchy looks like, and envision freedom as an essential part of the needed organizing, which is the work we do with the GirlTalk Rwanda program.

We believe in creating safe spaces where a diverse group of people, particularly women and non-binary people, can gather, learn together, share experiences, build sisterhood, and strategize on feminist transformation within the community.

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The culture of Silence in Tanzania: A conversation with Tanzania Feminist Collective

In recent years, we have seen increased political participation and influence of women's decision-making in Africa. However, the closing of this gender gap and advancement of women in politics is still undeniably slow and demands that we examine the implications and impact on the continent. One of the women who have managed to make it to electoral positions is Samia Suluhu Hassan, the first woman president of Tanzania. He was sworn in after the passing of President Magufuli. We reached out to Tanzania Feminist Collective to learn more about their work and assess what this representation means for the women in Tanzania and how the culture of silencing has enabled the under-representation and shrinking of women to take up leadership roles.

Tanzania Feminist Collective (TFC) is a digital resource or 'platform' and a collective of young Tanzanian feminists who are either women or non-binary. The collective operates as a digital resource that provides insights and education on several issues with feminism and disseminates this via digital or online channels, such as social media pages and their website. TFC has written and examined many social phenomena that impact the mental health and overall livelihoods of Black Tanzanian femmes, including how colonization shapes our beauty ideals through texturism and colorism and political issues such as what it means to be patriotic in Tanzania as a feminist.

1. How would you describe your selves at Tanzania Feminist Collective?

The collective is both a digital resource or "platform" and a collective of young Tanzanian feminists who are either women or non-binary.

We aim to decenter cishet men, their values, and their systems from our work and interactions at all times, and the most obvious manifestation of their systems is the patriarchy. We come together as like-minded people and believe in many of the same theories surrounding feminism, such as the application of womanism, African feminism, socialism, and abolitionism. We're all learners at Tanzania Feminist Collective, but we're doing so as a community, as being feminists in a patriarchal system can be isolating.

2. What are the main objectives TFC holds regarding how you organize and the impact you aim to achieve in Tanzania?

Our main aim is to archive our collective experiences and ensure that the experiences we share are as diverse as possible.

Our main aim is to archive our collective experiences and ensure that the experiences we share are as diverse as possible. We noticed a massive void in Tanzania in that there was not enough discourse on contemporary feminism. Many online spaces seemed to be a center for the spewing of misogyny. Usually, this is done so in a cavalier and casual manner which somehow acts as a soother for women and other people who notice. Some of these online spaces somehow held the view that misogyny and rape culture are topics that are light enough to joke about, and so they must not be as severe as we make them out to be. This continual trivialization of severe social issues has been detrimental to the life outcomes of many women offline. Therefore, we aim to stop those people in their tracks, create a new narrative, and make people understand why certain narratives are harmful by breaking it down for them.

3. What are some of the challenges you've encountered as a feminist digital resource center in Tanzania and what have been the focal topics of your work online?

We've faced fear due to alleged censorship and maintaining neutrality without dulling our message. We've noticed the power of language. Our writer-centric members have thought about and implemented ways of using language that convey a message clearly without outright shunning any group of people. Another challenge is that there can be backlash whenever you share information due to conflicting views. Our platform can be perceived as political, so dealing with large waves of backlash can be difficult, primarily as we do not disseminate a 'neutral enough' feminist message.

Our focal topics vary, but lately, we've been focusing a lot on the importance of mental health. Mental health is indeed a weapon, which is why if anyone at Tanzania Feminist Collective feels they cannot deliver something, they are entitled to step back for as long as they see fit. We don't operate like a corporation, and we try our best not to emulate a corporate style of working, which is why our work can take longer. Slow-living rejects individualism, and this way of working prioritizes community. We have also been focusing on how colonialism has manifested in our perceptions of ourselves, our beauty, and others.

4. TFC thrives strongly with an overarching value to educate. What strategies and means have you put behind in teaching about the age-long existence of patriarchy and how it plays in our daily lives and continues to expand into racism, sexism, and silencing of women?

As a collective, we've emphasized the importance of nuance and capturing those everyday nuances, breaking them down, and showing how this is directly or indirectly harmful.

For example, most Tanzanians have a clear consensus that rape is wrong, but multiple nuances surrounding sexual assault have not been thoroughly explored. We've always maintained that sexual assault is just the tip of the iceberg. Such occurrences do not happen in a vacuum but within a system that we can all uphold in one way or another. A man feeling comfortable enough to unsolicitedly sexualize a woman he doesn't know on an online platform should be considered something that raises eyebrows at the very least - but it isn't. In some cases, it is even applauded, and if the woman is lucky, it's ignored. Sadly, the way we operate within our offline systems is reflective online. The internet is mainly ungovernable terrain. There are few consequences for what happens, and that is wrong.

However, even if the collective cannot implement clear consequences at this stage. Our platform can share and invite people to implement clear standards of how we should operate and conduct ourselves online, respectfully towards femme-presenting people non-cishet men in general. In this way, we take experiences that most Tanzanians have experienced that may seem 'harmless' and show how it contributes to a system directly wounding and killing women.

5. Just as many African countries are deeply rooted in patriarchal structures, how do the historical Tanzanian traditional cultures and social norms pertain to the silencing and marginalization of women? Feel encouraged to share any anecdotes and experiences.

They do so in many ways and often over the entire course of one's life. A woman gets a sort of reprieve if she has given birth to offspring, has led a "respectable" life, and is an elder typically over the age of 60. However, she still cannot live as freely as her male counterparts. Little girls tend to be taught how to cook and clean by older women and girls in their households. They are told from a young age that they should know how to keep a home for their future husbands.

Speaking up or "talking too much" is vilified, and thus a young girl learns to keep quiet to avoid trouble. Young girls tend to take on responsibilities at a younger age, from practically raising their younger siblings to helping with household chores. Thus women's allotment of their own time and labor from a young age is out of their hands. They do not have the same leisure time as the boys. Another way social norms and cultures play a role in the silencing and marginalization of women is through marriage. There is a stigma against unmarried women, and there is definite social capital gained through heterosexual marriage. When a woman enters a wedding, there is an unequal power dynamic. Tanzanian society will not crucify the man as much as the woman for leaving the marriage. Thus the woman is told to "vumilia" (be patient) when her husband hits her, and too often, the social and familial stigma makes her stay.

6. With the swearing-in of the first Tanzanian woman president, how does the culture of silencing play into the under-representation of women and what does the right representation look like to TFC?

The culture of silencing plays a significant role in the under-representation, under-appreciation, and under-compensation of women. In terms of under-representation, women tend to be harassed and pushed out of places often meant "for men"; they are often relegated to non-speaking, non-leadership roles and are expected to perform copious amounts of unpaid labor. Daily violence, both in the private and public spheres, traumatizes women deeply, in addition to the roadblocks placed from a young age that prevent young girls and young women from succeeding. It leads to under-representation because they are not supported, and their needs are not prioritized. Young women, femmes, and girls are silenced around sexual assault, consent (not often taught or shown how to communicate their boundaries), and anything against the status quo.

Young women's dreams get clipped before they even see the sky because of the systemic and interpersonal ills that society wreaks on them. We believe that the first woman president is merely a figurehead of the patriarchy if she is not tackling the systemic barriers that hinder young women and girls from living fulfilling and comfortable lives. We believe that change can only happen from the ground up by actively centering the women thrown in the margins: disabled, gay, from rural communities, etc.

A question to ponder is, in what ways is this representation at the highest office materially and immaterially helping these women? We are cautiously optimistic about what the future holds for us, and although representation matters, it needs to be rooted in intersectionality.

7. For many being silenced means death and at the same time, speaking could also mean death, what groups of people are caught at the crossroads of this patriarchal paradox, and what has been the organizing and feminist response to this in Tanzania?

Tanzania's LGBTQIA+ community is a group of people who are often caught at the crossroads of this patriarchal paradox, especially poor ones. Another group of people caught at these violent and repressive crossroads is young women and children from impoverished communities. Unfortunately, too many initiatives and organizations that center women and children are often patriarchal and more eager to maintain the status quo than upend the systems that lead to the women and children seeking their care. A few are doing good work around taking a holistic approach and ensuring the groups have autonomy, but we still have a long way to go. Organizational support for members of the LGBTQIA+ community is almost non-existent. Tanzania, as most countries in the world, is deeply homophobic. Too many so-called feminists and human-rights activists are homophobic in their rhetoric and praxis. Members of the LGBTQIA+ community and their allies tend to do their work away from the public eye to prevent prosecution, assault, and harassment. As a result, members of the LGBTQIA+ community tend to be shut out from mainstream movements and often lack support due to rampant homophobia.

One cannot be a feminist or a human-rights activist while being classist, racist, homophobic, sexist, ableist, etc. We need to unlearn our prejudices while fighting for the liberation of all people; listening to and prioritizing the voices of marginalized people is the best way to ensure a collective victory.

8. Silencing plays a significant extension in supporting rape culture, what type of organizing and strategies can be put behind breaking silences, teaching about body autonomy, and sex and sexuality education?

In Tanzania, rape culture is so embedded in the fabric of our society that we don't even notice it until somebody points out what it looks like. One of the best strategies is community education, specifically where the organizers are part of the community they educate. For example, a core team could train tens of people from different communities of different genders and sexual orientations, all Black Indigenous Tanzanians. They would go into these communities and note how rape culture is perpetuating and identify the folks who are already doing anti-rape work.

The hope is to have education at all age groups that is community-centered and community-specific that talks about body autonomy, sex, and sexuality. The end goal is to have communities that have anti-rape culture tools and education that are for them, by them.

9. What would you like to share with young women and girls in Tanzania who are learning to break their silences, break the cycles of being second-class citizens, and find their identities?

We want to share that it can feel incredibly lonely, especially for young people who are dark-skinned; you are not alone. Your voice and your being on this earth are a brilliant miracle. The ancestors who have found their voices and asserted themselves in your way are always guiding you. I would also advise them to rest, lean into familiar, nourishing customs, and, if possible, find uplifting communities. Community offline, online, away from home, wherever. It is a long and arduous journey so pacing oneself and having helpful companions is critical and necessary.

**Author : Leti
Junayna**



The Sexual offenses bill in Uganda

Uganda recently passed the Sexual Offenses Bill, whose purpose is the effectual prevention of sexual violence and to enhance punishment for sexual offenders. However, the bill contains provisions that sustain the worrying trend of violence against LGBTQ+ people in Uganda and further institutionalize discrimination and prejudice against targeted groups. We spoke to Gloria Mutyaba, a queer activist feminist who has been working at FARUG for close to 5 years now. FARUG is the oldest solely Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer women organization that has been actively leading and organizing sexual orientation and gender identity through lobbying dialogue to create and facilitate greater visibility and voice. FARUG is also a mini-clinic that provides free safe medical care and Legal aid to LBQ women in Uganda. Gloria is also part of the Anglophone board secretary that integrates leadership building grooming activists and leaders.

1.The bill has been described as a positive move, because “it gives women the right to withdraw consent”, do you think the bill actually provides an amendment for a broader application of different forms of sexual violence?

The sexual offenses bill was tabled in parliament to protect women from sexual violence and make it easier for the violated victims to report and take their cases to court. Article sections 16 and 17 talk mainly about sexual relationships between same-sex people. However, the former criminalizes same-sex relationships. The latter criminalizes closeted people or those who are believed to be queer. The Bill enforces the belief that same-sex relationships cannot have consensual sex, therefore criminalizing any sexual activity done by queer folks or those presenting as such. This Bill is also an emotionally draining journey as one of the clerks even said they wish all queer people were set on fire.

For example, UWOPA is the Uganda Women Parliamentary Association with whom we were discussing the Bill. Unfortunately, while we were discussing the Bill, there was a lot of religious intolerance preached to us. It forced many Queer and sex work organizations to leave the coalition but are still doing a lot of individual and collective work around the harm inflicted by the Bill.

We also emphasized that the criminalization of consensual same-sex relationships was wrong during these discussions.

People are now criminalized for their gender identity too. If the clause is passed and a homophobic reports truthfully or falsely about a person being queer or Trans, they will be jailed.

Queer women won't report sexual violence directed against them because how is an offense going to report another offense? For example, a mini-clinic run by FARUG reported cases of queer women who can't receive any medical service or treatment in a normal clinic because they present as gay. It goes to show how violent the law is.

Another perfect example is that prisons are also very gendered and unsafe. They will put you where they want, and you will go through abuse, including sexual violence and harm, regardless of your gender identity. With the passing of the Bill comes deliberate mistreatment of LGBT people. A law is not good if people's lives are being changed for the worst.

2.What are some of the positive outcomes of the amendments?

The bill has some good parts that protect women, specifically cis straight women, but I do not trust it will be implemented rightly. For example, the sexual offender's database is good but problematic for queer people because they have been registered as criminals whether they have a criminal record. I particularly appreciate the gender-neutral language used.

The bill also recognized many sexual offenses except rape and defilement, so several girls and boys will be protected from sexual harassment. For example, you will be able to report a stalker or someone sending you nudes. However, the protection of victims in court is not fully guaranteed, so it's only practical to say that it's still problematic as much as the bill shines a light on consensual sex.

3.What could be the possible effects on the number of reported rape cases?

There will probably be an increase in reported cases of sexual harassment. However, it doesn't stipulate how victims or survivors will be protected, so some people will still be hesitant to report. Confidentiality and protection of victims should have been worked on and emphasized.

Unfortunately, online violence won't be easy to report though. The Bill is not yet ready to be signed as a lot needs to be worked on. It is heartbreaking that marital rape was taken out and will continue to go unpunished. A lot of work is yet to be done, but we appreciate the use of neutral language.

4.Does the bill give a full picture of what consent is and is not?

It does not, and it will be a hurdle to report rape. I was highly disappointed by the Member of Parliament who made a statement about rape that insinuated victims cause or are to be blamed and provoke rapists.

There are so many things wrong with the bill that still make it difficult for especially women to report rapists. There is a lot of patriarchal protection, which is unfortunate because it protects men who are the biggest sexual offenders.

5. How is this new bill different from the original discredited 2013 anti-homosexuality bill? Or would you say, it's a reintroduction?

Clauses 16 and 17 were copy and paste of the 2013 anti-homosexuality bill. The only difference is just a bit of language change.

6. Would you say the main motive of the bill is to criminalize homosexuality?

We are forced to believe so because it looks like it is a camouflaged law to criminalize LGBT people and sex workers.

7. What are the current responses and collective actions within the feminist community on whether this bill should be recalled?

There's a lot of advocacy as we are trying to build popular support from the masses that provide shelter and homes to several queer activists. However, most of the work has either been halted or affected by the lockdown and the pandemic in general. Additionally, I am also involved in a team that produces a podcast called 'Ba Queer Twogere' on YouTube. We are focusing on the project at FARUG that promotes advocacy work for queer people and women in Uganda.

8. What steps and forms of solidarity need to be taken to ensure that this bill is recalled?

People need to recognize that just because a particular clause affects others doesn't mean it will not affect you; once you are compliant, your turn will still come. There are no half rights. None of us is safe until we are all safe. You aren't protecting us. You are just protecting yourself. You don't know who in your circle is queer. So many people are in the closet, and you are sacrificing them. By celebrating yourself, you are sending your other loved ones to prison.

9. How can we increase awareness about the bill and any last words you'd love to share with us?

Popularize the dangers of the Bill as much because many people do not know about the specific details and layers of the Bill. Share direct links to the Bill. Civic education is essential. If we can invest and talk about elections, we should do the same for laws and how they uniquely affect different society groups.

Thank you for allowing me to do this and add my voice to your journal

Website



Gloria Mutyaba

FEMINISM AND SELF CARE

“From a feminist perspective, we understand that the right of women to take, embrace and indulge in pleasure, to be human and have others recognize our humanity is actually a very radical act. Self-care should be a priority and not an afterthought. Reclaiming self-care is rooted in autonomy and choice, as well as a mindful effort to understand the important balance, even if sometimes muddled, of community and family care, activism and self-love. Reclaiming self-care is a feminist act.” *Reclaiming Our Self-Care As a Feminist Act.*

Feminism, by its definition, challenges the existing patriarchal values and structures in place to oppress women. Therefore, it attracts rejection and hostility from those that benefit from these systems. As feminists, we face a lot of physical and online hatred over our activism. In addition, the movement and nature of work are to fight, disrupt, organize and advocate, which naturally takes a toll on our mental health. We are further burdened by society's given responsibility of being caregivers and are expected to take care of both women and men within the space of our activism. The society holds us to surreal standards of being. When you join the movement, start to identify as a feminist, and begin to do feminist work, it's assumed that you transform into a magical being that never gets exhausted. Your human side is shunned, and you're expected to deliver your best every single waking day of the year without making a mistake.

We are further burdened by society's given responsibility of being caregivers and are expected to take care of both women and men within the space of our activism. The society holds us to surreal standards of being. When you join the movement, start to identify as a feminist, and begin to do feminist work, it's assumed that you transform into a magical being that never gets exhausted. Your human side is shunned, and you're expected to deliver your best every single waking day of the year without making a mistake.

As feminists, we tend to put the well-being of everyone else in the community above our own. As a result, we perhaps feel guilty taking time to look after ourselves instead of putting said time to better plan a revolution or something of the sort.

We tend to forget that we are among those to be fought for. We need our bodies to constantly give us a red light to know when to stop fighting and be okay with just existing.

We also forget that it's more than impossible to pour from an empty cup. Hence, it's a necessity to pause & tend to our own needs to replenish our energy reserves to keep dismantling the capitalist patriarchy.

You can't possibly ignore the toll this fight takes on every one of us in every single way in many forms, including emotionally, mentally, or physically. Therefore, we need to understand how issues in the world affect us, the difficulty in advocacy, and the possibility of being ostracized by society. It is essential to be kind to ourselves and know when to take a break and rest. We can only achieve our goal and continue the fight when we are well physically, emotionally, and mentally.

We should also understand and empathize with one another to accept that we are all unlearning and learning. Finally, it is also crucial to weigh how we approach the complexities of being activists and hold each other accountable vis-a-vis culture.

The Practice of self-care on a personal level every day is necessary. Self-care looks different for every individual, but some of the things you can incorporate into your schedule include; seeing a therapist, engaging in self-care discussions in feminist groups, deep breathing exercises, setting personal boundaries and maintaining them, yoga, meditation, journaling, singing, treating yourself to your favorite dessert, writing to-do lists so you won't forget to do any crucial tasks and can plan for your time efficiently, set aside specific times to use social media, naps, positive self-talk; the world is already trying to kill you, the least you can do is be your own friend and cheerleader, get an app to remind you to drink water as hydrating is vital, and writing a love letter to yourself.

“Sustainability is about being able to do the work we love, while still feeling full and happy in every part of our lives. It's about feeling safe, feeling connected, feeling recognized, respected, and valued—for who we are, as much as for what we do” Jane Barry - World Pulse article *“What's the point of revolution if we can't dance”*, (2010)



INTERVIEW ON THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID PANDEMIC ON GIRLS AND WOMEN IN ZAMBIA.

Whether it's a natural disaster or an economic one, a crisis always exacerbates effects more harmful to a specific demographic that is already vulnerable to existing systems designed to oppress them. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected women and young children more uniquely. Through this, we've seen feminist leadership and organizations rise to provide communal support and make radical steps to ensure safe responses are set up. One of the young women taking up feminist leadership is Miriam Mwinga, the Acting Executive Director at Young Women Christian Association (YWCA). Miriam has worked with the YWCA organization for six years, focusing specifically on supporting Zambian youth, women, and children.

1) What does the YWCA do?

YWCA is a women's organization supporting women, children, and other underprivileged people. We have a strategic plan for 2018-2021 to power these two marginalized groups economically, create awareness about HIV/AIDS, and promote Sexual Reproductive Health Rights. YWCA has a membership program in GBV prevention programs and works to foster safe spaces in communities by reaching out to youth on GBV and social justice. During this pandemic, the organization has designed COVID response programs that include running shelter homes and temporal protective shelters for women most affected during this time.

YWCA also provides further assistance to women by being their linkage to the judicial system through referrals, taking them to court, and connecting them to other organizations that offer safe spaces to learn more about SRHR, GBV and inspire young girls especially to do with owning their sexuality.

2) What challenges are young women currently facing?

COVID is one of the most prevalent challenges women face since it affects them more uniquely. And in 2019, we had droughts and flooding that caused food shortages that aid workers had to go and provide humanitarian relief.

Among the most pressing issues is that women and children in Zambia suffer from sexual violence and are forced to exchange sex for food that exposes them to STI, including HIV, which immediately leads to a sharp rise in unwanted, teenage, and child pregnancies. We also have so many cases here where some parents send children to sell their bodies for food.

For example, a girl was given to a man for five bags of mealie meal and a cow. Additionally, households have been strained because of the different dynamics due to Covid and semi lockdown. Domestic workers weren't getting paid as well.

3) What has been the outcome of the strategies of the country to fight GBV in the past five years?

There has been an increase in access to Gender-Based Violence reports that sensitize and provide information on prevention programs and help break the silence around sexual violence. It also enables people to seek help from many organizations and know where to find all the proper services. There is a lot to be done, but so far, we have witnessed remarkable strides and achievements in making the information accessible to people.

4) Has Covid taken us back in the fight for equality and equity?

In a way, GBV thrives on inequality because many women have lost their sources of income. They lose their voice if they don't have the means. People are socially distancing and keepin to themselves, so it's hard to report or see something wrong. They need face-to-face interactions, but this is hard because of Covid.

5) What has been your organization's response to these findings?

It's extremely difficult and times are quite hard. The response is delayed due to health risks we face ourselves. We are front-line workers but we do not have PPE. If a person doesn't report directly it's hard to go out and reach out in the community. We have volunteers who receive allowances for lunch and transport. We do our community reach using megaphones and vehicles and spread information. But it's hard to evaluate the impact of our sensitization because issues can't be reported directly because it's in the open and not in a tent-like before.

6) How long do you think we should offer this kind of support post-pandemic in order to achieve a Zambia that is free from violence against women?

We need to have long-term projects and funding.

7) In your own view do you think the government of Zambia is doing enough to support women and girls during the pandemic right now?

Yes, there is a lot that the government is doing together with funding partners like the UN and organizations like YWCA. For instance, the Minister of gender with the UN and other organizations have been on the ground strategizing on how to increase the number of social protective shelters for women and children. These shelters will offer psychosocial support like rehabilitation legal and medical support to survivors of GBV to regain life traumatic events.

8) How would you encourage feminist organizations to be more involved in building programs and responses that are supporting women?

There are many feminist organizations in Zambia. They can share different roles to support women; for instance, women can step up to provide psychosocial counseling mentorship programs to uplift women going through a hard time. On top add: economic support through skills training and start-up capital to GBV survivors, skill-building and mobilizing ourselves

and putting together our resources to ensure that these women have clothes. These clean homes have enough supplies and sanitary products. Feminist organizations can provide books, motivational information, and speeches to help support these women emotionally free themselves from these homes. It is essential for these women to feel loved and supported as they flee from these confining homes.



A note from the Girl Talk team in Zambia

Growing up, we had these “Girl Talks” in schools, where a female teacher was asked to teach us about hygiene and menstruation. They were these twenty minutes of awkward talks that we all despised and couldn't wait to get out of. You would think such discussions would excite us and offer us an opportunity to learn, but they didn't because they were often held in a way that made us feel like being a girl was a burden, that we were cursed with periods and bodies the world couldn't wait to violate.

We were made to feel like a burden as our breasts were growing and our bodies maturing was a problem for men, and we had to work extra hard to be clean and not tempt men. To say these talks were unpopular was an understatement.

The first time I ever enjoyed a Girl Talk was in the 10th grade because of a younger and more fantastic teacher. She spoke to us like people, gave us space to speak, listen and taught us many things about our bodies. She was the first feminist teacher I met, and one thing I remember about her talks was that she taught us that our bodies were our own and we should never let society dictate what we do with them

When you think of Girl Talk Zambia, I would like you to think of that, unlike the awkward victim-blaming girl talks I attended in primary school. We have opened room for young girls and women to speak freely about sex, the effects of rape culture, Feminism, and SRHR. We have done it in a way that allows for questioning, for women to share their concerns and hopes openly. Girl Talk Zambia is like meeting up with friends little sisters; it's a safe space where we share experiences, give advice, and life-changing information to ensure we all live in the world a little safer, a little brighter, a little empowered, and a little more feminist.



Expansion GT in Francophone Africa: how the program lands where girls and women urgently need it

2021 at Choose Yourself has been a year that has seen our Girl Talk program expand into Francophone African countries. Countries like Benin, DRC, Ivory Coast have hosted Girl Talk. In turn, the enthusiasm of other countries to have Girl Talk did not take long: Burkina Faso, Mali, Cameroon, through feminist organizations in these countries, configured the will and the need for Girl Talk in their contexts. Here are 03 things you need to know about the Girl Talk program in Francophone Africa:

The Girl Talk program in Francophone Africa values the work of local organizations.

Girl Talk spaces are organized in French-speaking African countries in partnership with local organizations. In these countries, girls and women are the best specialists in what they experience in society. We believe that feminist organizations working in their various contexts also have expertise on the issues and needs of girls and women in their countries. So we don't do work outside of existing community work. We listen to feminist organizations in these countries about their needs, and we work in partnership with them. For example, in Benin, we organized a narrative workshop before the first Girl Talk conversation to understand the context, then worked on the organization of Girl Talk with the Young Girls Actors in the feminist movement existing in the country. Côte d'Ivoire was with the Ivorian League for Women's Rights. In Burundi, with Burundian volunteers living in Burundi and the DRC, Goma, and Kinshasa, we organized conversations with existing organizations. Our program is based on the current mobilization to breathe new life and promote local organizations' work.

The Girl Talk program in Francophone Africa makes the feminist movement visible.

In French-speaking African countries, because the spaces are not mainstreamed, there is an impression that there are no young feminist movements. The Girl Talk conversations in Benin, Goma, Kinshasa, Cote d'Ivoire, and the digital Girl Talk made it possible to see that the feminist revolution is very young in these countries. Nevertheless, there is a revolution in place, actions taken, conversations raised, and a shared resolution among girls and women to abolish the present, burdensome system of oppression. And girls in Francophone Africa are not waiting and are not on the sidelines. In Benin, a revolution is in place with community actions. We have seen Jeunes Filles Actrices de Développement, which works for

equality between girls and boys through grassroots learning. In Côte d'Ivoire, a revolution is taking place with actions,, and the work of the Ivorian League for Women's Rights for the elimination of gender-based violence is an example. In Guinea, we heard from Kadiatou Konate on the community organization of the Club des Jeunes Filles Leaders de Guinée in the fight against early marriage female genital mutilation.* Girl Talk conversations have helped shed light on organizations' work in their countries.

Indeed, there are needs for learning about the movement, sisterhood, the normalization of freedom for feminists themselves and other girls and women, care for oneself and others, benevolence towards oneself, and the sense of movement in community. Gradually, together with girls and women in their contexts, we will achieve our freedom together. But the feminist movement is very existing and alive in Francophone Africa. And The problem remains how to give power to this movement?

By organizing the Girl Talk conversations, we monitor the sustainable actions we can take given the issues raised by girls in their contexts. The young women in our Girl talk spaces work to implement rolling action agendas as responses to some of the pressing issues while at the same time cherishing the safe and secure Girl talk spaces where girls and young women are neither victims nor survivors of anything, but just free and fulfilled people.

As a prelude to the Girl Talk conversations in Benin and Abidjan, we conducted online surveys in which young women from these respective countries participated. We asked about the situations of girls and women in their contexts, their relationships and narratives with feminism, how existing feminisms in these contexts operate, the needs and challenges of young women in these contexts. Some answers:

***"Feminism is a movement of women who fight for women's rights and gender equality. In Côte d'Ivoire, feminism is a movement that is gaining more momentum once slandered due to the awakening of the consciousness of Ivorian women. The actions of feminists are not known to the general public; they are often subject to ridicule and insults. I want to know feminism better, to participate in the effort of the movement, the origins of African feminism, the legitimacy of feminism in Africa, the means of the action of the movement"* (excerpt from the answers of the girls to the survey in the introduction to Girl Talk Abidjan)"**

“Feminism for me is a movement against the patriarchal system. Feminism is a movement that fights against patriarchy and gender equality. The feminist movement in Benin itself is becoming much more important and considered by women. The feminist movement is taking off in Benin. For about a year, I have realized that the movement is quite active and I had the chance to meet committed feminists in the field who carry the fight. It’s active and really helpful. I want to learn about solidarity between women, about the history of feminism, how and where to act” (excerpt from girls’ responses to surveys in the introduction to Girl Talk Benin).

These excerpts demonstrate two main things: Girl Talk coming to Francophone Africa landed where girls and women needed her conversations. The responses in the polls show a revolt, a shared resolution among girls and women that the system of oppression of girls and women is present, heavy, and must be abolished. At the same time a need to verbalize the authentic experiences of girls and women to learn together, to have safe and secure spaces where girls and young women are neither victims nor survivors of anything, but just free and blooming. These responses also evoke the need to safeguard oneself in the face of resistance from the system. We are excited to continue this expansion.



A quick overview of the situation of girls and women in Côte d'Ivoire

The situation of girls and women in Côte d'Ivoire is not different from that of girls and women in many countries on the African continent. According to certain specificities of each region, the stories can show that girls and women are affected differently. However, the issues remain almost identical: gender-based violence, rape, sexual assault, female genital mutilation, deprivation of sexual and reproductive health rights, girl's education, the weight of socio-cultural norms, culture of silence, and action by the public authorities in favor of the rights of girls and women still deemed insufficient, not proportional to the size of the issues.

In Côte d'Ivoire, the MICS survey carried out in 2016 indicates a prevalence rate of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) of 36.7%. According to the Demographic and Health Survey (EDS 2011/2012), 12% of girls are in early union before 15, and 36% of 18-year-old girls are already married. Data collected by the GBV-AIMS in 2020 shows 151 reported cases of rape. The survey report on violence against children and young people in Côte d'Ivoire (VACS-CI) indicates that three out of five girls (58.0%) and two out of three boys (86.5%) were victims of violence during their childhood, about one in five women (19.2%) experienced sexual violence before the age of 18. In a document from Unicef Côte d'Ivoire, we read that 53% of women aged 15-49 justify that a husband is entitled to hit or beat his wife in certain circumstances: for example, if his wife burns the food, argues with him, goes out without telling him, neglects children, or refuses sex.

[\(Link\)](#) The study "Violence against Women and Girls (VAW) in the District of Abidjan in times of pre and daily Covid-19: Surveys in Abobo, Anyama, Attécoubé, Treichville, Koumassi, and Yopougon" carried out by the Organization of Citizens for the Promotion and Defense of the Rights of Children, Women and Minorities (CPDEFM) revealed that forced marriage is the most widespread violence of all documented VAW (29.66%) in the six target localities of the study, that women are primarily victims of rape (25.77% of VAW reported by the population), that female circumcision and pedophilia affect respectively 19.03% and 15.98% of children (mainly girls) in these six localities, that femicide is a reality in Abidjan, 416 women died under the blows of a violent spouse/partner/boyfriend, i.e., 9.56% during the years 2019 and 2020 [\(source:\)](#)

Regarding the 2016-2017 school year, the Strategic, Planning and Statistics Department of the Ivorian Ministry of National Education reported that 4,471 cases of pregnancy had been recorded in educational establishments; 1,153 girls aged 9 to 14, 2,393 girls

aged 15 to 18, and 920 young women over 19 became pregnant according to the report titled "School Statistics Pocket 2016-2017". On the Unicef Côte d'Ivoire website, we read that more than 1.6 million children do not go to school and most are girl. Faced with these various reports, we can only sound the alarm again, join the many voices raised on the continent to say that the situation of girls and women on the African continent is critical. It is another form of terrorism, more serious since it seems to challenge little and the actions of all the stakeholders do not match the size of the issues.



First Girl Talk in Abidjan: a space on what feminism is in theory and practice

The Girl Talk program of Choose Yourself initiates, organizes, and amplifies spaces for girls and women in Africa to discuss their liberation, how to dismantle the system of oppression and build strong solidarity between girls and women, and actions to make communities safe places for all of them. As part of the expansion of this program in Francophone Africa, Abidjan hosted the first Girl Talk in March 2021. It was organized in collaboration with La Ligue Ivoirienne des Droits des Femmes, an organization of young feminist women who fight against gender-based violence and defend women's rights. This first Girl Talk Abidjan focused on the theme: introduction to feminism in theory and practice. Before this first Girl Talk in Abidjan, which focused on the theme of introduction to feminism in theory and practice, the organization team carried out an online survey via a form to find out what are the different appropriations of feminism that existed in the Ivorian context. For you, what is feminism? To this question, the survey revealed several answers:

- A movement that teaches women their rights and duties in society;
- Feminism is for me a voice for women to obtain equality between themselves and men;
- Feminism fights so that the social differentiations imposed between girls and boys are considerably reduced;
- feminism is a current that fights for the respect of women's rights and gender equality;
- Feminism is a women's movement established to defend women's rights and fight for gender equality;
- Feminism is a movement to fight for equal rights between men and women;
- She is a person who advocates women's rights;
- What I know about feminism is that it's a movement that fights for the respect of women's rights;
- The struggle to assert the rights of women in the same way as those recognized for men.
- For me, feminism is a current of thought that aims to value, liberate and empower women by highlighting their rights;



- Feminism is the defense for the recognition of women's rights, the acceptance of their power, role in society;
- Feminism is a movement that makes it possible to abolish the inequalities between men and women, of which women are the main victims and also to promote the rights of women in civil society and in private life;
- It is a militant movement for the improvement and respect of women's rights in society;
- It is a movement and a state of mind that militates and advocates equal rights between men and women;
- Feminism is a movement that advocates the extension of the role of women in society;

By analyzing these answers, we perceive that on average, in this context, most of the respondents have an idea and an appropriation of feminism but more like a current, a theory that advocates something. The perception of feminism as a movement rooted in liberation, sisterhood was not the case with everyone. We know that women liberate themselves in movement, in solidarity by lifting each other up. So, what answers did Girl Talk provide? The first Girl Talk in Abidjan addressed what feminism means in practice, in operation. These young women who had their first contact with feminism were able to understand the movement, to understand what the feminist struggle consists of, and above all to know that it was not an open war against men but a fight for male equality. women in all fields and how achieving this equality would benefit them and the future generation. For the feminists present, it was an opportunity to share their experiences, meet sisters and agree on collectively and effectively fighting against violence* against women together.

This Girl Talk conversation to explain feminism in practice was relevant in that it helps to strengthen the advocacy movement for girls' and women's rights in Abidjan through the understanding of sisterhood.

Do girls and women in Benin feel free, fulfilled, respected, protected, emancipated, autonomous?

When I started writing this article, I asked myself: do we truly question the condition of girls and women in Benin? I am not talking about the workshops and seminars (which no doubt have their merit) organized across the country with the support of international organizations and institutions to talk about the rights of girls and women. I mean, do we have honest, deep, ongoing conversations about the situation of girls and women in Benin? Is this rooted in our habits? On reflection, my answer was: not really. Ask a citizen and a lambda citizen in Benin: how are the girls and women in Benin doing? The chances are that many of the answers are kind: they are well, they are strong, they work for the country's development, they take care of their homes, we love them. However, the reality is much more than anything else. Are communities in Benin safe places for Beninese girls and women? What is the condition of girls and women in Benin? Do girls and women in Benin feel free, fulfilled, respected, protected, emancipated, autonomous? Let the content of this article situate us.

On the issue of girls' education in Benin

In Benin, a phrase was famous: "sending a girl to school is throwing money out the window." This sentence painted a particular belief that investing in girls' education would be a loss for families. However, Benin has made great efforts to make schools accessible for girls to change this state of affairs. Dans La Dépêche No. 192 d'Afrobareomètre, 13 mars 2018 | Horace Gninafon, We can read: "Benin since 2006 has implemented certain policies that can promote access to education. Thus, the governments that succeeded to the head of the country decreed, in 2006, free registration fees for all children in primary school and then, in 2010, free registration fees for girls in the sixth grade. In 2013, this policy was generalized for girls up to third grade" ([Link](#).)

There have also been extensive awareness campaigns in Benin to deconstruct the beliefs that sending a girl to school would be throwing money away. These efforts are commendable and have contributed to transforming mentalities and conditions favorable to girls' access to school. As a result, many girls have had the chance to go to school.

In the report on the Analysis of the situation of children in Benin, 2017, UNICEF (<https://www.unicef.org/benin/media/146/file/SITAN.pdf>), we can read: "traditional prejudices against girls and women confine them to lower social status. Practices such as the early marriage of girls push parents to support girls less than boys. They also encourage girls to attend school sporadically or to drop out". According to Unicef, in Benin, three out of ten girls are married before the legal age of 18, and one out of ten before 15. These early marriages deprive girls of their right to education. The school environment operates according to social gender mechanisms that frame social life. Therefore, the whole problem of girls' education remains and arises this time around two aspects: the access of girls to school and the retention of girls in school. It is a cross-cutting issue with many causes.

Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights

According to statistics, from 2016 to 2020 in Benin, 9,369 cases of early pregnancy were recorded in schools. Some of these pregnancies cause girls to drop out of school. Formal and informal sex education remains a significant issue in Benin.



We have sensitizations on sexuality that are organized. On June 07, 2018, in Cotonou, there was the launch of the pilot phase of the introduction of sexual health education in school curricula in a sample of schools. These are efforts that, unfortunately, are not up to the challenge.

In an article published by a media in Benin ([Link](#)), we read that abortion is the 3rd cause of maternal mortality in Benin. Two hundred women die of abortion each year in Benin. Would we have had a different situation if women could access contraceptive methods and safe abortion?

According to UNFPA Benin, the contraceptive prevalence rate (all methods combined) is 17%.

The law relating to sexual health and reproduction in Benin stipulates that "All individuals are equal in rights and dignity in matters of reproductive health. The right to reproductive health is a fundamental universal right guaranteed to every human being, throughout their life, in any situation, and any place. No individual may be deprived of this right they enjoy without any discrimination based on age, sex, wealth, religion, ethnicity, or marital status". But this same law authorizes the voluntary termination of pregnancy only in the following cases: when the continuation of the pregnancy endangers the life and health of the pregnant woman; at the request of the woman, when the pregnancy is the result of rape or an incestuous relationship; when the unborn child is suffering from a condition of particular gravity at the time of diagnosis.

Violence against girls and women in Benin

We lack precise national data on this theme. Yet, girls and women in Benin suffer from several forms of violence according to stories and experiences: rape, domination, assault and battery, deprivation of access to health, to work, a whole range of oppression, heritage of the patriarchal system.

The government has social promotion centers in the country's municipalities, a LOIN°2011-26OF 09 JANUARY 2011 on the prevention and repression of violence against women. However, the psychosocial and legal management of cases of violence remains problematic. Then there are in Benin, these stories that even statistics cannot tell: how girls and women are conditioned to validate violence, celebrate male domination, see their personal and economic autonomy as obstacles to marriage, and this fallout from social norms: culture of silence! Girls and women in Benin, like girls and women in the world, share patriarchal oppression as a heritage while dreaming of a society where they would feel free, fulfilled, respected, protected, emancipated, autonomous.



Impact of GirlTalks on girls in Benin

We are at a time when voices are rising to demand gender equality urgently. African countries are not on the sidelines of the fight; however, in French-speaking Africa, few fundamental institutions put girls first, consult them on their real needs in order to provide a concrete solution to their problems. On the ground and the internet in Benin, we see that there are young girls who are revolting by denouncing the inequalities of which they are victims or of which the girls around them are victims. Among these inequalities, we count harassment, whether in school or the workplace, rape, intimidation, death threats, early marriages, dropping out of school, death or rape threats for girls from the LGBTQ+ community, and many more—other ailments. For the latter, the situation is even more critical because they are rejected by their immediate surroundings and the rest of society and are forced to hide and silence their voices, creating frustrations that can lead them to a complete loss of self-confidence.

The activists who raise their voices on social networks are primarily between the ages of 15 -25 and are, for the most part, not prepared to manage the harassment they can and do suffer in line. This harassment takes all possible forms, namely threat of rape, the threat of rejection from a close relative or friend, insulting remarks, stalking, to name a few, which too often lead them to abandon the fight by fear of reprisals, others burn out. Benin's hard is that we lack networks with which we can identify and would make girls speak up to denounce or take action in their communities. They do not feel supported or have anyone to turn to or confide in to talk about the difficulties they are encountering in their struggles. They prefer to remain silent because even if they suffer from inequalities that are normalized in our societies, they will not have to bear the weight of the suffering of many others in addition to their own. They prefer to stay on the sidelines to preserve their sanity and not be exposed. The fact that Girl Talk, a program aimed at providing safe and secure spaces for girls to discuss the violence they experience because of their gender, the stereotypes they are exposed and this without taboo, expanded to French-speaking Africa was something relevant for us. Especially in Benin, it was life-saving for us, young girls.

And It is already beginning to bear fruit according to the opinions gathered from the participants of the Girl Talk Benin organized on March 20 in Cotonou on the theme "how to recognize and deconstruct stereotypes sexist." *A participant said: "During Girl talk, when I was in community with other girls, and we were discussing, I felt heard, and it allowed me to gain self-confidence". Another participant shared: "I didn't know that we could have this kind of space. When I write on social networks to denounce what we suffer as injustices, I receive a lot of negative feedback, especially threats and insults, sometimes even coming from girls to discourage me. Having taken part in Girl Talk opened my eyes to the importance of denouncing. Still, above all, it reassured me. Today I know that I belong to a community to which I can submit my fears, ask directives to carry out my fight well without being judged and without fearing anything",*

The first Girl Talk Conversations in Benin were important because they brought new feminist voices. We witnessed the need to have this kind of space more often for young women to share on the subjects that affect them and define together proposed solutions to overcome patriarchy. We have already hosted two girl talk conversations in Benin and they were revolutionary conversations. The latest conversation was about consent and it was a real learning moment.



The situation of girls and women in Burundi

Concerning the Burundian tradition, women and girls are considered human beings who exist for the man's pleasure, to accompany him, bear him children, obey him almost blindly, and carry out the household and rural work. This patriarchal vision reduces girls' and women's fields of action, potentials, and personalities.

According to a study conducted in Burundi at the request of Search for Common Ground, patriarchy remains the deeply rooted norm in Burundian society. In this context, women's actions and aspirations are restricted and influenced by their social environment, mainly determining their consideration and value. From early childhood, girls and boys are educated differently. For example, parents train the boy to be a leader and the girl to be a wife and mother. With this conditioning, the girls often grow up without having had the opportunity to discover their talents, desires, passions, dreams, and ambitions because society has already shaped them: girls do not speak out loud; responsible girls stay home.

In such a context, we began Girl Talk spaces in Burundi. These conversations are healthy and reliable spaces for exchanges, offering the opportunity for girls and women in Burundi to share their experiences and develop strategies to bring about change in the community.

Burundi as one of the countries where feminism is still misunderstood by a large number of its population and contested because of the culture and religion that advocates patriarchy, Girl Talk conversations focus a lot on the exchange of ideas to promote collective awareness of the patriarchal context in Burundi

Conversations about raising your voice, choosing yourself, having personal autonomy and deconstructing rape culture

The first Girl Talk in Burundi was an introduction to feminism. During this discussion, we discussed how to break the silence.

This first conversation happened in the deep belief that girls and women have a voice, and they need to use it loud and clear because silence will not protect them. It was an invitation to girls and women to live instead of surviving, raise their voices when they are abused, witness, or suffer injustice but mainly speak without fear because their voice counts.

The second Girl Talk addressed how young girls should dare to dream big despite society's expectations. However, not choosing themselves and normalizing societal expectations prevents girls and women from putting themselves.

This second Girl Talk conversation made it possible to explain to the girls that choosing oneself is not selfishness but safeguarding oneself in a society hostile to their deep identity; it is to clarify one's value and not let yourself be dehumanized. Together, we learned that the earlier girls must become aware of themselves and their potential, the earlier they can start unlearning sexist stereotypes.

The third Girl Talk conversation was centered on deconstructing rape culture. During this conversation, we unpacked rape culture and the normalized guilt of girls even when they are the victims. As for resolutions to the dismantling of the culture of rape in Burundi, we agreed that we must change Burundians' mentalities by educating our communities about rape culture. Educators have a significant role to play. They should teach young men that when a girl says no, it means no and not a yes or maybe. Beginning these teachings in families and schools so young boys know what they are allowed to do and what they are completely forbidden. Then we agreed that we need to change how we react to words, jokes, and any act promoting rape and its culture to condemn any act and word trivializing and minimizing rape openly.

The fourth Girl Talk conversation in Burundi addressed the personal autonomy of girls. We learned together during this discussion that to achieve personal autonomy, girls need to deconstruct the norms and limiting mindsets instilled in them. It starts with naming the social norms that keep girls from being fully themselves and then deconstructing them. A girl who decides to go beyond the standards and decisions of her family encounters rejection. How can she assert herself to achieve her empowerment?

In conclusion, The main objective of Girl Talk conversations is to provide a space for free exchanges and promote Burundian women and girl's liberation.



Feminism and the situation of girls and women in the DRC: interview with Emmanuella Kahete

In the countries where Girl Talk conversations take place, they are organized with local partners, feminist organizations and movements working in these countries. Emmanuella Kahete is our organizing partner for Girl Talk Goma and gender program manager at Uhuru Knowledge Center. In this interview, she talks about the situation of girls and women in the DRC and her personal experience with feminism.

Quelle est la situation des filles et femmes dans votre pays ?

Women constitute 52% of the population of the DRC. Being a large Central African country, the narratives and state of play on girls and women in Congo vary from place to place. Finally, we can mention the question of the early marriage of girls, which is generally accompanied by an abandonment of the cycle of study and therefore puts an end to schooling. These customs and practices have a crucial influence on women's perception of their economic, political or social role. For example, women are generally excluded from controlling household income even though they contribute to the economy by implementing various production activities. Generally speaking, women make up 12% of those elected to the national assembly and to the provincial assemblies; less than 10% in the security services (army, police, justice), 8% among public officials.

In the country's east, armed conflicts have been rife for more than two decades. There is a proliferation of armed vigilante groups and militias, which cause insecurity in the region. Women are among the most vulnerable who are particularly affected by these conflicts. In these environments, sexual violence is increasingly frequent. Some organizations, associations, or foundations help these women despite this deplorable security situation. This is the case of the Shalupe Foundation, which works for the economic empowerment of rural women, and Dr. Denis Mukwege, who also helps women victims of sexual violence by providing care and support at his Panzi hospital in South Kivu.

For you, what is feminism?

Feminism, for me, is this bond that unites women around the world to fight hand in hand for their freedom, knowing that no woman is free if all women are not. It is the set of actions carried out to define, promote, defend, and enforce the rights of women. It is all the means that tend to empower women on the legal, political, social, economic levels...

Feminism, for me, is this bond that unites women around the world to fight hand in hand for their freedom, knowing that no woman is free if all women are not. It is the set of actions carried out to define, promote, defend, and enforce the rights of women. It is all the means that tend to empower women on the legal, political, social, economic levels... Feminism wants men and women to be treated equally. Beyond being an ideology, a philosophy, or anything else, feminism is a way of life for me. It is not something apart; it is part of an individual. You can't call yourself a feminist at work and not be one at home. It would make no sense, and it would even water down the essence of feminism. We are feminists all the time, or to speak of myself, "I am a feminist all the time". To be a feminist is to become aware of one's humanity and the absurdity of inequalities based on gender; it is the realization that a woman is a human being beyond all things.

What is your personal experience with feminism?

Since I was very young, I have fought against stereotypes and gender-based violence. I remember since high school I used to argue at length with girls and boys who thought that women's destiny was marriage, taking care of their household, that a woman shouldn't work, or that the lives of women were simply because they have someone "a husband" who works hard for them. I considered, and still do, to nullify, to minimize the importance of a woman's life. Did that mean that women do not have the right to dream, the right to be wrong, to make mistakes, to realize this dream? That I couldn't become someone other than someone's wife? I told them that I could do anything, not just to challenge them but because I was convinced that I had this power deep down. What drains me is my determination to change things, solve the problems facing my community, and promote and defend women's rights as essential community members.

How is feminism organized here at home?

It is often Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), associations, civil society that campaign to respect women's rights. Several programs are created to respond to a particular problem women face in our communities. I will cite, for example, the Dynamique des Femmes Juristes (DFJ) in the east of the country (Goma) and My neighbor (in the west, Kinshasa), which fight against sexual violence and gender-based violence. Some platforms bring together these associations and movements, such as the women's house here in Goma.

For us, feminism has long been conceived as a question of NGOs, regularly constituted legal persons, and necessarily individual individuals speaking. Today, the trend is changing little by little, with young girls using social networks to fight against injustice and gender-based violence. Discussions are increasingly open around the issue, and girls and women are getting involved.

How can the conditions of girls and women in your country be improved?

We must approach the population to seek together the answers to these problems. We all live in particular situations. We may even experience the same situation but differently. Thus, my point of view alone is insufficient to address the problem in depth. Everyone has a part of the truth, and together we will put the pieces of the puzzle to recreate that truth. At the Uhuru center, we involve every woman and girl in developing our program to define themes and objectives so that the impact is effective and lasting. Because, although the program is for the community's common good, we must keep in mind that what is done for us, without us, is done against us.



«Girl Talk is proof that change by and for girls and women is possible. Girl Talk is an unforgettable experience: frank exchanges, hearts that still hope for something, a tomorrow, a future. I did not think I would be able to meet minds so open to a change of mentality. I met young girls and women who are committed, motivated, ambitious, and have a vision. I have met people who already have power but need support, coaching to learn how to use this power so that it can benefit the whole community. These meetings have encouraged me to pursue the program convinced that I am on the right path towards empowering women and girls in my community.» ~

Emanuella Kahete, Girl Talk Goma coordinator

The first Girl Talk in Goma with ChooseYourself Organization was at Uhuru Knowledge Center. The discussions focused on the theme "From personal development to community development. The participants chose the theme based on the personal development needs that emerged from previous discussions. The gender program at Uhuru Knowledge Center aims to promote and support the participation of women and girls in all areas of community life, especially in the political decision-making process. Therefore, women must know how to deal with all the internal and external obstacles that hinder their personal development and their community's development.

The discussions took place in a relaxed atmosphere; we defined these different obstacles, the participants were motivated by finding solutions to all these obstacles. We concluded that all community members must feel individual and collectively concerned to address gender-based problems and violence.

Thanks to Girl Talk and the various activities that we have organized at the UHURU center, girls and women are becoming more and more involved in society. They seek to identify the key issues and what approach is taken to address them. Indeed, there were already established feminist organizations working in different fields.

Still, Girl talk became a meeting place for all these organizations to discuss specific issues and build capacity in their areas of action: leadership, entrepreneurship, peace, fight against gender-based violence, agriculture, sewing, etc. It's a mixture of ideas brainstorming that always leads to finding solutions that are more appropriate to situations and more sustainable because everyone participates in all decision-making stages.

The Girl Talk program is necessary for changing mentality, without which no change is possible. I commend this initiative. It is a participatory method. Change is not imposed, but everyone becomes aware of the role to play in the sustainable development of their community. What is good about Girl Talk is that this program is implemented in several countries in Africa. Unlike other organizations, Choose Yourself Organization works with communities to identify problems and propose solutions. Choose Yourself accompanies local organizations and does not force them to follow a specific pre-established practice. It is a program that makes you feel useful and part of something. The general testimony is that Girl Talk Goma is essential and will allow everyone to achieve the objectives they have set for themselves regarding their personal development and community development. Girl Talk helps women and girls realize their place in the community. For a long time, they felt out of place, but little by little, they built this self-confidence based on which they will take up several challenges.

I wish for girls and women in the DRC, that through all the problems, the obstacles they encounter, they can learn to discover themselves, personally in order to become aware of their role, crucial within the process towards development. sustainable development of the DRC in particular, and of Africa in general. Let them realize their power, because they already have it. I wish they couldn't passively wait to be empowered, or to break the glass ceiling because to me, they already have the power and you just have to learn how to use it.

“I want girls and women to regain their dignity, for the patriarchal system to be completely abolished”

Young women who work for women's rights in the DRC, especially feminists, are automatically considered atheists who, under the influence of the Western world, wish to westernize society (in other words, to corrupt society's values). Young activists are seen as women without values or principles. They face harassment. Since feminism is considered a Western movement in the DRC, it is tough to convey many messages and deconstruct the patriarchal narrative. Understanding the concept of feminism as well as the power of culture and religion in society could make feminism look like a movement that comes to destroy beliefs and make many women immoral and disrespectful.

In this context, we started the Girl Talk program in Kinshasa, making it possible to organize open conversations about our realities as women. We meet to discuss progress and the issues we face to put new strategies to deal with them. In our case as Girl talk, we focus on giving voice to young girls from different contexts and often the most vulnerable who come to express themselves on the violence they are subjected to, for example, by articulating their experiences.

During one of the Girl talk conversations, we had young girls who tried to talk about the violence they had suffered and how they no longer had confidence in themselves to move forward and flourish in life. We gave them advice and introduced them to feminist movements so that they know that in these movements, we are not only there to defend, we can also be there because we need support. This sorority is very important for exchanging and creating resilience and advocacy mechanisms in the face of the many violations of women's rights.

With Girl Talk conversations, young girls have found healthy and safe spaces where they can express themselves, be listened to, and believe without being judged, and this has a significant impact on their self-confidence and fight for their rights and dignity. As a Girl talk team, our wish is to see the patriarchal system completely abolished. We are working on it.



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 - 7. To the rest of our Girl Talk and our ChooseYourself Community, we are beyond blessed to continue doing this work with you all. We hope you learn a thing or two from this journal.**
- Enjoy!**